Jane Addams: Author and Activist

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In the late-nineteenth century, America experienced life amid the clasp of the Industrial Revolution. As new methods of production developed, specialized jobs were created. There was an increasing demand for labor which caused a mass movement towards urban centers as Americans and immigrants, hoping to earn money, flooded into cities. Although women played a more active role in society as they found employment in factories, the stereotypical views of women still prevailed. Women's wages were much lower than men's, and women were exploited by the younger men of the cities. An increasing number of children were also enveloped in the dramatically changing nation as they struggled to earn money for their families. The Industrial Revolution saw harsh factory conditions; sweatshop workers were maimed by machines, and they faced diseases and even death due to long hours and unsanitary conditions. Jane Addams, although from a wealthy family, grew up watching poverty-stricken people struggle through these conditions. Influenced by her father's moral teachings, the altruistic Addams decided at an early age that she would work for the welfare of others. In 1889, she founded Hull House where the neighboring poor of all ages and ethnic backgrounds—mostly women and children—were welcomed and treated with care and hospitality. Through her book *Twenty Years at Hull House* and numerous other writings Addams commented on the societal problems of her day such as women's and children's rights. As an avid humanitarian Addams not only penned her liberal ideas, she also acted upon them. Addams's writings and work focused especially on the welfare of women

and children, helping to endorse protective labor laws and educating the needy while also advancing the issue of women's rights.

Jane Addams was particularly concerned about the well-being of female factory workers. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, economic conditions forced women to become more involved in society in order to support their families. There was little to do in small towns, and many women moved to cities where they obtained jobs in factories. Oftentimes, the earnings of the men of the household did not suffice; hence, women, and even children, were compelled to help make a living. Most children who held jobs were from immigrant families. These children worked to support their household because "their parents gradually found it easy to live upon their [the children's] earnings." The factory workers' wages were low, and the conditions abusive, but women and children had to toil for survival. Jane Addams realized the cruelty of the factory environment, and she scorned factory labor. She declared, "The long hours of factory labor necessary for earning the support of a child leave no time for the tender care and caressing which may enrich the life of the most piteous baby. Addams saw how mothers worked long hours, leaving their children neglected at home, and how this was detrimental to family life. Therefore, Addams advocated labor laws, and finally two crucial laws were passed in Illinois. The first law reduced workday hours to eight, and the second law, "regulating the sanitary conditions of the sweatshop and fixing fourteen as the age at which a child might be employed," was also put into effect. However, factory labor was not the only social dilemma she addressed.

Jane Addams also worked to improve other social conditions for women and children. In her book *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, Addams showed that

prostitution was the "ancient evil" that working women were lured into by some of the young men of the cities. Children were also experiencing a change in moral values as they were exposed to city life. Addams wanted to preserve the morality of the nation and teach people middle-class cultural values. She encouraged education for women and children; men were not the only ones who could benefit society with their intellectual abilities. Addams argued that a woman "wishes not to be a man, nor like a man, but she claims the same right to independent thought and action." Addams encouraged women to take part in society. According to Addams's essay "Women and Public Housekeeping," society was "enlarged housekeeping" which could not function properly if the "traditional housekeepers [women] have not been consulted as to its multiform activities." At Hull House, women and children received the moral education that Addams believed was essential for them. They also enjoyed facilities for physical and mental health. People of all ages and cultures could participate in music, theater, arts, and physical education. These activities were both amusing and educational, and they provided a vent for the overworked women and children, while simultaneously teaching them ethics and giving them social models.

Throughout her life, Jane Addams practiced the idea of giving. Her selflessness is affirmed not only by the countless social reforms that she advocated and undertook but in her legacy of publications on social issues. While she was concerned about her community and the nation, Addams was also concerned about the world as a whole. She became the first president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, fighting for world peace. Addams was recognized as a heroine throughout America and internationally because of her efforts to improve her community and the world. She

received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, and on May 21, 1935, the woman who had touched so many lives with caring and compassion passed away.

Her work was crucial in shaping the American society and is still in effect today. She advocated the passage of protective laws that have become so deeply etched in American ideals that it would be difficult to imagine America as a land of liberty without them. Addams was an influential woman who changed lives and significantly molded American society through her writings and her personal sacrifice. Jane Addams was the epitome of a true American—one who worked diligently for something she believed in, implementing positive changes to secure the liberties of her fellow human beings. [From Jane Addams, A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil; Jane Addams Hull House Museum at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Biographical Sketch of Jane Addams." http://www.uic.edu;jaddams/hull/ja bio.html, (Sept. 18, 2005); Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull-House with Autobiographical Notes; Jane Addams, "Women and Public Housekeeping," <a href="http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toe/modeng/public/AddWome.html">http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toe/modeng/public/AddWome.html</a>, (Aug. 26, 2005); J. B. Elshtain, Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy; D. M. Kennedy, L. Cohen, and T. A. Bailey, "Industry comes of age." In J. L. Woy, C. S. Kyle, A. West, M. A. Kerns, & R. R. Jaffe, eds. The American Pageant; D. Levine, Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition.]